PATTERNS OF POWER · THE SETTLEMENT PROTOCOL

The Decaying Anchor

Three Colonial Settlements and the Field That Broke Them, 1493–1948

HELD AS TESTED, NOT REVEALED

THE DECAYING ANCHOR
PREFACE

Preface: the collaboration, and what this study is for

On how the work was made, the question it asks, and the discipline it is held in.

This study is part of the Patterns of Power series and, like the others, it is a collaboration. The research direction, the case selection, and the judgement are the author's; the historical synthesis, the drafting, and much of the scholarly retrieval were done with Claude, Anthropic's model, each claim checked against the record before the next was begun. The method is stated openly because it is an emerging form of knowledge production and ought to be visible rather than concealed, and because a reader is entitled to know how a thing was built before deciding what to make of it.

The series examines particular orders and asks a single question of each: how did a distribution of holdings originally taken by force become an arrangement that armed men would defend rather than contest? Every prior study took *one* hierarchy as its unit — a dynasty, a republic, an empire — and asked how it settled inside itself. This study does something the series has not done before. It takes as its unit not a hierarchy but the *field* of hierarchies: the European powers of the modern period, a set of rival armed states facing one another with no authority above them, and the three successive legal instruments by which they tried to divide the non-European world among themselves without going to war over it. The three are a papal decree of 1493, a conference agreement of 1885, and a League of Nations article of 1919. This study reads them not as the older scholarship did — as masks over colonial extraction — but as three attempts to build a single kind of thing, a shared source of title among rivals, and it argues that the three form a decay sequence: each weaker than the last, for reasons the framework can name precisely, until the whole apparatus failed.

The framework is stated in full below, so no prior reading is required, and nothing here depends on having read another study. It is held as tested, not revealed — a lens laid over the record, to be corrected by whatever the case will not fit. This case both confirms the framework and strains it hard, and the section on where it strains is the part of the study its author considers most worth keeping. To explain how an order legitimated itself is neither to praise it nor to excuse what it did, and the thing being legitimated here — the partition of whole continents and the peoples on them — was among the largest exercises of organised violence in the record.

THE DECAYING ANCHOR
SECTION ONE

The puzzle

Why powers that could crush any single rival kept writing documents to divide the loot instead of fighting over it.

Here is something that should be stranger than it usually seems. Across four and a half centuries, the most heavily armed states on earth repeatedly seized enormous territories from people who could not stop them — and then, rather than simply keeping what their guns had taken, they went to considerable trouble to obtain a piece of paper first. A Spanish king in 1493 sought a papal decree before pressing his claim to the Americas. Fourteen European states in 1885 sat in Berlin for three months to agree rules for claiming Africa. The victors of the First World War in 1919 wrapped their acquisition of Germany's and the Ottoman Empire's territories in an elaborate doctrine of "trusteeship" administered by a League of Nations.

None of these documents was addressed to the people being conquered, and none of them added a single soldier to any European army. The Taíno of Hispaniola were not consulted about the line the Pope drew, could not have read it, and would not have been bound by it if they had. The peoples of the Congo basin were not party to the Berlin agreement that assigned their homeland to a Belgian king as personal property. So the puzzle is sharp: if the paper did nothing to the conquered and nothing to the conquerors' military strength, what was it *for*, and why did powers that feared no African or American army spend real effort — diplomatic, financial, and in the papal case spiritual — to obtain it?

And there is a second puzzle folded into the first. The three documents were not equally durable, and they failed in different ways. The papal line held for a few decades and then a large part of Europe simply stopped recognising it. The Berlin rules held for a generation of partition and then dissolved into the very disputes they were meant to prevent. The Mandate system of 1919 was the shortest-lived of the

three, and within thirty years the whole colonial edifice it was the last expression of had begun to collapse into decolonisation. Three instruments, the same apparent purpose, three progressively shorter lives. The pattern needs explaining, and the older reading — that these were simply three costumes worn by one unchanging drive to extract — cannot explain why the costumes got flimsier each time. This study argues that they got flimsier because the thing underneath them was getting structurally weaker, in a way the framework can specify exactly.

THE DECAYING ANCHOR
SECTION TWO

The framework, for a reader who has not met it

Possession against ownership, the bystanders' problem, the anchor and its four properties, and the field of hierarchies.

Begin with a distinction modern intuition tends to collapse. **Possession** is a present-tense physical relation: what I can hold right now, by my own strength. Force is entirely adequate to it, because force is exactly the capacity to take and hold in the present. **Ownership** is a claim about the future and about other people: that a thing will still be mine tomorrow, mine while I sleep, mine when I am not standing on it, and that when I die you will treat my heir as its owner. Ownership is a structure of expectations about how others will behave toward a thing across time. And force, sovereign over the present, is impotent over exactly this: a sword takes a field today and cannot promise it next spring. The part of a holding that force cannot reach — its persistence when I am absent, its transmission when I die — is precisely the part that has to be manufactured by something other than force.

Now the political version. A world of armed men who hold only by force is exhausting and unprofitable, and the standard account says they settle because settling pays better. True, and insufficient: it explains the incentive to settle but not why any particular settlement holds on the day defection would pay. Consider one armed man deciding whether to seize his neighbour's holding, and strip out conscience entirely. His decision is a forecast about third parties — the other armed men who will watch. If they stand aside, the fight is one against one. If they fall on him together, he is destroyed. Now take the bystanders' problem, which is the harder one. Each asks: *is this my quarrel?* Absent a common ground of title, the honest answer is no — my neighbour's holding is his affair, and spending my strength to

defend it buys me only casualties and an enemy. So every bystander waits, knows the others will wait, and that shared expectation is exactly what makes the grab safe. Warlordism is therefore not a failure of restraint but a coordination failure among the men who might have punished it.

What breaks the deadlock is a **shared source of title**. If every holding derives its rightfulness from the same authority, then an attack on any one holding is an attack on the ground beneath all of them, and the bystander's arithmetic flips: letting this stand establishes that holdings may be taken, which is a fact about *his* holding too, so intervening becomes self-defence at one remove. He can predict the others are computing the same thing, so acting no longer exposes him. Call that shared source the **anchor**. The political scientist Barry Weingast formalised this in 1997 for the vertical case, between a ruler and his subjects: a sovereign needs only one group's acquiescence to transgress, so divided subjects are transgressed at will and united ones are not, and the work of a shared rule is to give everyone the same signal about when to resist. The same logic runs horizontally, among armed peers.

A working anchor has four properties. It must be **determinate**, yielding exactly one answer to who rightfully holds what. It must be **unrevisable by any competitor** — and this is the deep one, because the danger is not that a strong man *breaks* the rule (that is legible and the coalition punishes it) but that he *changes* it, since rule-change does not trigger the coalition. If the source of title sits inside the competition, the strongest man never needs to violate anything; he revises, and every subsequent seizure is regular. So the anchor must sit beyond the reach of the men competing for it. It must be **common knowledge** — known to all, known by all to be known by all — which is what public ceremony manufactures; the political scientist Michael Chwe observed that a public rite works less by informing each person than by letting each person see that everyone else is being informed. And it must be **attached to an office rather than a man**, or it dies with its holder.

One refinement the series has already been forced to make: the anchor need not be *exogenous* in the strong sense of standing outside the human world altogether. It need only be **unforgeable by the current claimants**. A bloodline sits inside the human world and still cannot be forged by a rival, because descent is the one thing conquest cannot confer. Unrevisability is the requirement; placing the anchor outside the contest is merely the commonest way to achieve it.

And the piece this study turns on. An anchor pacifies the inside of a hierarchy by constituting an *outside* — to bind an inside is to define who is not in it. So there is never one settlement but always a **field** of them, each with its own anchor, and between the hierarchies there is no shared ground, because each anchor faces inward. The theorist Kenneth Waltz called this between-states condition *anarchy* — not chaos, but the structural absence of any authority above the states, which throws each back on its own force for survival. That is the bystanders' problem, unsolved, at the level of hierarchies: no common anchor authors the international distribution of holdings, so each power is a mere possessor of its place in the world. The historian Hedley Bull argued against pure anarchy that states do form a thin *society*, bound by weak common institutions — the balance of power, diplomacy, international law — among whose goals he listed, tellingly, the "stabilization of possession." This study reads the three colonial documents as exactly that: attempts to build, at the between-hierarchy level, a **proto-anchor** — the shared source of title that is robust inside a hierarchy and chronically weak between them, because between them there is no floor beneath it willing to enforce its verdicts against the strongest player.

THE DECAYING ANCHOR
SECTION THREE

The strongest man cannot be the author: why colonial title needed a document at all

The audience question, and the answer that reorganises the whole case.

The framework's first question of any legitimating instrument is: *who is the audience?* Not who is affected — who is the belief *for*? And the answer here dissolves the puzzle of why powers that feared no colonial army bothered with paper.

The audience was never the colonised. A legitimating story does two jobs, and they run on different fuel. Toward a subject population it buys cheap compliance, and that requires genuine conviction, because a people who privately regard the arrangement as robbery must be held down by force, which is the expensive condition the story exists to avoid. But none of these three documents was cut for that job. The conquered were not going to be argued into consent and were not expected to be; they were handled by the floor — by muskets, by disease, by the sheer asymmetry the strategist Thomas Schelling identified when he noted that a threat deters only if it is credible, and an unarmed population's threat against an intact, officered military is not. The document did no work on them at all.

The audience was the *other European powers*. This is the whole of it. The documents were anchors among the colonisers — instruments by which a set of rival armed hierarchies, facing one another across the anarchic field with no authority above them, tried to manufacture a shared source of title so they would not have to fight each other over the spoils. Spain did not need the Pope's blessing to take land from the Taíno, who could not resist. It needed the Pope's blessing to take land without Portugal contesting it — to convert a possession that France or England

might grab into an ownership the other Christian powers would recognise and, crucially, would unite to defend, because an attack on Spain's papally-granted title would be an attack on the ground of everyone's papally-granted title. That is the bystander mechanism, operating among kings.

This is why the documents cost real effort and why the effort is the proof of what they were for. The framework's sharpest diagnostic is that *force never pays for what it does not need*: where the strongest party pays an avoidable price to obtain legitimacy — petitions an authority it could ignore, sits three months in a conference, wraps a conquest in obligations — it has revealed that the legitimacy was load-bearing for some audience whose belief mattered. The colonised were not that audience; the rival powers were. And the reason a document was needed at all, rather than a simple pact among the powers, is the framework's core: a bare agreement among armed men is not self-enforcing, because the strongest can revise it. What the powers needed was a source of title none of them controlled — an author they could all point to who was not any one of them. The entire history that follows is the history of that author getting weaker.

THE DECAYING ANCHOR
SECTION FOUR

First anchor: the line drawn from outside (1493)

A papal decree with a real exogenous author, and the schism that de-authored it.

In 1492 a Genoese navigator in Spanish service crossed the Atlantic and returned claiming a route to the Indies. This threatened immediate conflict with Portugal, which had spent the century pushing down the African coast under earlier papal grants and regarded the ocean routes as its own. Two Catholic powers, heavily armed, now had overlapping claims to an unknown hemisphere, and the ordinary resolution — war — was in neither's interest.

The resolution they reached is the purest anchor of the three. In May 1493 Pope Alexander VI issued the bull *Inter Caetera* — a bull being a formal papal decree, named for the lead seal, the *bulla*, attached to it. Verified against the text: the bull drew a line from the Arctic pole to the Antarctic pole, one hundred leagues west and south of the Azores and Cape Verde islands, and granted to the Spanish crowns all lands discovered or to be discovered west of that line, excepting any already held by another Christian prince before Christmas of 1492. And it enforced the grant with the strongest instrument the Pope possessed: under penalty of *excommunication late sententie*, to be incurred automatically, it forbade all persons of whatsoever rank, even imperial and royal, to enter those lands for trade or any purpose without Spanish permission. The following year the two powers adjusted the line between themselves in the Treaty of Tordesillas, moving it west so that Portugal received a claim to what became Brazil.

Now test the four properties, because this instrument passes them in a way the later two will not. **Determinate:** a single line, one answer to who holds what. **Common knowledge:** issued, published, enforced by a sanction every Catholic monarch understood. **Attached to office:** the grant flowed from the papacy, not the

person of Alexander VI, and would bind his successors. And decisively, **unrevisable by the competitors:** neither Ferdinand of Spain nor João of Portugal could edit a papal bull, because its author sat outside and above both of them, in an authority that medieval Catholic kings could not forge or command. This is the same structural fact this series found in a bishop appointed to Ethiopia from Egypt, beyond any Ethiopian emperor's reach: the title-granting authority must be one the competitors cannot capture. In 1493, for two Catholic powers, the Pope was exactly that.

But note the limit, because the whole decay sequence begins here. The bull bound only those who recognised the authority behind it. In the language the lawyers later used, it was *res inter alios acta* — a matter concluded among some parties that cannot bind others — and Spain's repeated attempts to get other European states to accept its validity never succeeded. The anchor's reach was exactly the reach of the Pope's recognised authority, and no further.

Which is why the anchor failed the moment that recognition fractured — and it failed by the framework's first route, in which a competitor stops being bound not by breaking the rule but by rejecting the source. Beginning in 1517 the Reformation split Western Christianity, and the Protestant powers that emerged — England, the Dutch Republic — rejected outright the Pope's authority to distribute the world. To them the bull was not a wrongly-decided grant but no grant at all, because its author had no standing. The French king Francis I, though Catholic, made the same move from interest rather than doctrine, reportedly demanding to see the clause in Adam's will that had divided the earth between Spain and Portugal — a joke that is precisely a refusal to recognise the source. Once even one strong power treats the anchor's author as illegitimate, the anchor cannot bind that power, and the bystander mechanism it powered collapses: an English attack on a Spanish claim in the Americas was no longer an attack on the ground beneath everyone's title, because the English did not hold their own title from that ground. From the later sixteenth century, colonial control in the contested zones was decided again by naval force — which is to say the anchor had failed and the field had reverted, for the powers outside the Iberian-Catholic bloc, to the warlordism the anchor exists to end.

The finding: a strong anchor, with a genuinely exogenous author, unrevisable by the competitors — but only for the competitors who shared the author. When the

recognising group fractured, the anchor did not weaken gradually; it simply ceased to exist for the defectors. Route one: de-authorisation.

THE DECAYING ANCHOR
SECTION FIVE

Second anchor: the powers author their own title (1885)

A conference with no author outside the room, and a rule the strongest could simply reinterpret.

By the 1880s the situation had changed in a way that made a papal solution unavailable and forced a structurally weaker one. There was no longer a single authority all the relevant powers recognised — Protestant Britain and Germany, Catholic France, Portugal, and Belgium, Orthodox Russia shared no Pope. And the object of division was Africa, where accelerating claims threatened to set the powers against one another directly.

The instrument they produced reveals the weakness by its very form. From November 1884 to February 1885, fourteen states met in Berlin under the German chancellor Bismarck and signed a General Act. Two of its articles carried the load, and their wording, verified against the text, matters. Article 34 provided that any power taking possession of a tract on the African coast, or assuming a protectorate there, must notify the other signatories, so as to enable them to make good any claims of their own. Article 35 recognised the obligation of a power occupying such coastal territory to establish authority sufficient to protect existing rights and freedom of trade. Out of these grew the doctrine that became notorious as **effective occupation**: to claim African territory against the other powers, a state had to demonstrate actual administrative control, not merely plant a flag — and had to notify the others, so they could object.

See what has happened to the author. In 1493 the title-granting authority was the Pope, outside and above the two competitors. In 1885 there is no author outside the room. The powers are authoring their own title, by agreement among themselves, in a conference of the very parties whose claims are to be adjudicated. This is precisely

the configuration the framework flags as fatal to unrevisability: *an author internal to the competition cannot legitimate the competition*, because the strongest competitor can always revise the rule rather than break it. The Berlin Act is a self-authored anchor, and a self-authored anchor is only ever as fixed as the current balance of force among its authors.

And the record shows exactly the predicted failure, mistaken at the time for ordinary diplomacy. The effective-occupation rule, as written, applied to the *coasts*. What of the vast interior? The powers developed the doctrines of the *hinterland* and the *sphere of influence* — the claim that control of a coast implied a right to the unoccupied land behind it — which are not applications of the Berlin rule but revisions of it, extending the grant far beyond what "effective occupation" as written would permit. And the revising was done by the strongest. Britain, holding the most coast and the most force, consistently pressed the looser reading — coastal presence implying interior claims — against the stricter constructions preferred by rivals who stood to lose by it, and the looser reading substantially prevailed, because Britain could make it prevail. No one broke the Berlin Act. The strongest powers simply interpreted it in their own favour, and the rule bent to the force behind the interpretation. That is failure route two — the anchor revised by a competitor — occurring continuously, as the normal mode of operation rather than as a crisis.

So the Berlin anchor never became a settled ground at all. It required constant patching by dozens of subsequent bilateral treaties and boundary commissions, because it could not do what a real anchor does — remove the question from the contest of force. It was a running negotiation among armed powers that called itself a rule, and its verdicts tracked the balance of strength because its author *was* the balance of strength. It held a degree of order among the powers for a generation of partition, which is not nothing; it prevented the scramble from becoming a general European war, which was its actual purpose. But it did so as a weak, self-authored proto-anchor, revisable by the strongest, exactly as the framework predicts a self-authored anchor must be.

The finding: weaker than 1493 by a specific structural degree — the loss of an author outside the competition — and failing not by dramatic collapse but by continuous revision in favour of the strongest, which is what an internal author always permits.

THE DECAYING ANCHOR
SECTION SIX

Third anchor: the disguise a rival forced (1919)

A trusteeship doctrine that existed only because a competing anchor had entered the field.

The First World War stripped Germany of its colonies and dismembered the Ottoman Empire, leaving vast territories whose disposal the victorious powers had to arrange. A generation earlier they would simply have annexed them, as Berlin's logic allowed. In 1919 they did not, and the reason they did not is the key to the whole decay sequence.

By 1919 a rival legitimating principle had entered the field with enough force to make naked annexation costly. Its most visible carrier was the American president Woodrow Wilson, whose Fourteen Points of January 1918 set out war aims for a reshaped world. Precision matters here, and the loose shorthand should be corrected: the famous phrase "self-determination" does not actually appear in the relevant point. Point Five called for an impartial adjustment of all colonial claims, based on the principle that in determining questions of sovereignty *the interests of the populations concerned must have equal weight with the equitable claims of the government whose title is to be determined*. That is weaker than "the colonised shall rule themselves" — it says their interests must *count*, not that they decide — and Wilson himself applied it chiefly to the peoples of the defeated empires in Europe, not to the colonies of his British and French allies. But the principle, once loose in the world, could not be confined to the uses its author intended. The idea that a population's own interests and wishes had standing in determining who ruled it was now a competing account of legitimate title, and it made the frank language of conquest and annexation politically difficult in a way it had not been in 1885.

The Mandate system is what colonial acquisition looks like when it must route around a rival anchor it cannot yet defeat. Article 22 of the Covenant of the League

of Nations, verified against the text, provided that colonies and territories which had ceased to be under the sovereignty of the states that formerly governed them, and which were inhabited by "peoples not yet able to stand by themselves under the strenuous conditions of the modern world," should be governed under a principle: that the well-being and development of such peoples formed "a sacred trust of civilisation." The tutelage of these peoples was to be entrusted to "advanced nations" who would exercise it as *Mandatories on behalf of the League*. The territories were graded — A, B, and C — by how near they were deemed to eventual self-rule, and the mandatory powers were to report to a Permanent Mandates Commission in Geneva.

Read this through the framework and it is transparently a *disguise*, which is itself a finding. The victorious powers acquired Germany's and the Ottomans' territories — Britain and France took the lion's share of the Middle East and Africa between them — and this was, in substance, the same transfer of possession the earlier documents had authorised nakedly. But it could no longer be *said* nakedly. So possession was dressed as trusteeship, ownership as a temporary "sacred trust" held "on behalf of" a higher body, conquest as tutelage of peoples not yet ready to stand alone. The framework's language for the deep function of an anchor is that it makes a made arrangement appear given — but here the anchor is doing something new and telling: it is not confidently making conquest appear cosmically ordained, as the Mandate of Heaven or the Solomonic descent did for orders at their height. It is nervously making conquest appear *temporary and benevolent*, because a rival principle has made permanent conquest unsayable. An anchor that has to disguise what it is doing is an anchor already losing to a competitor.

And it was the weakest of the three by every measure the framework supplies. Its author was, if anything, more internal than Berlin's — the League was composed of the very powers holding the mandates, so the trustee and the body it reported to were substantially the same parties. Its enforcement was nil: the Permanent Mandates Commission could receive reports, ask questions, and make recommendations, but it could not compel a mandatory power to do anything, nor sanction a violation. It was a proto-anchor with no floor beneath it whatever, which the framework says is the defining weakness of any between-hierarchy anchor — and here the weakness was total. The Commission was a reporting desk, not a court, and certainly not an enforcer.

The finding: weakest of the three, because for the first time the anchor operated against an active rival anchor — the principle of the populations' own standing — rather than in an uncontested field. It could no longer make conquest appear rightful, only make it appear temporary, and a settlement that must promise its own eventual dissolution is not a settlement but a managed retreat.

THE DECAYING ANCHOR
SECTION SEVEN

What broke the field: the excluded became a player

Why there is no fourth document, and why decolonisation is the field's proto-anchor losing.

The three documents are a sequence, and sequences have directions. This one runs downward: a strong exogenous anchor in 1493, a self-authored anchor in 1885, a disguised and contested anchor in 1919. The obvious question is what a fourth would have looked like — and the answer is that there was no fourth, because the field itself broke. Understanding why is the point of the whole study.

Recall the framework's hardest structural claim: every anchor pacifies an inside by constituting an outside. The European colonial anchor authored title *among the European powers* and, by the identical operation, defined the colonised as the outside — people whose lands were the object divided, not parties to the division. For four centuries that outside was, in the framework's terms, "the excluded": inside the reach of European force, outside the settlement that force authored, handled by the floor and addressed by none of the documents. The Taíno, the peoples of the Congo basin, the populations graded A, B, and C in Geneva — none was ever an author of the title to their own land. They were what the title was *about*.

What changed across the twentieth century is that the excluded became a player. The rival principle that surfaced in 1919 — that a population's own interests and wishes have standing in determining who rules it — was, in the framework's terms, *the anchor of the colonised entering the field*. It gave the outside a source of title of its own: not descent from a conqueror or a grant from a Pope or a conference, but the claim that a people is the rightful author of its own government. Once that anchor had purchase — and two world wars, which spent the European powers and armed and mobilised colonial populations, gave it enormous purchase — the colonial field

had two anchors in it, not one, and they were incompatible. The European proto-anchor said title to these lands flows from agreement among the powers; the new anchor said title flows from the peoples living on them. There is no line one hundred leagues west of anywhere that reconciles those.

This is what the companion study to this series calls the between-hierarchy contest, and it is why there was no fourth document. Decolonisation is not the European anchor being reformed into a better one. It is the European proto-anchor *losing* — being displaced not by argument but by the arrival of a rival anchor with, at last, a floor beneath it: colonial populations organised, armed, and unwilling to be held except at a cost the exhausted European powers would no longer pay. The framework's iron rule is that a check binds only as far as the coordinating power consents to be bound, and the mirror of that rule is that an anchor holds only as long as the floor beneath it can enforce its verdicts. By 1948 — the end date this study takes, with the independence of India and Pakistan the year before and the whole edifice visibly going — the floor beneath the colonial anchor was gone, and the anchor went with it.

So the decay sequence has an end, and the end is not a fourth and feebler document but the collapse of the field the documents had governed. The anchor got weaker at each step — exogenous author, then self-author, then self-author disguised before a rival — and the reason it got weaker is that the field it operated in was, across those same centuries, ceasing to be all-European. The Bull bound two Catholic powers who shared a genuine external author. Berlin bound a dozen powers who could agree on no author but themselves. The Mandate bound the powers before a watching principle they could not silence. And decolonisation is the moment the watched principle acquired its own coalition and its own floor and took the field.

THE DECAYING ANCHOR
SECTION EIGHT

What the case shows, and where it strains

Including the parts the framework handles badly, which are the parts worth having.

What it shows. The three documents are not three masks over one unchanging drive, which is how the older extraction-framework reading had them. They are a decay sequence of a single between-hierarchy proto-anchor, and the decay is structural and specifiable: the author moves from *outside the competitors* (the Pope, 1493) to *inside the competitors* (the powers in conference, 1885) to *inside the competitors and contested by a rival anchor* (the League before the principle of the populations' standing, 1919). Each move is a loss of exactly one property the framework says an anchor needs, and each instrument is shorter-lived than the last in direct proportion. The case confirms the companion study's central claim from the other direction: that between-hierarchy anchors are chronically weak because they lack a floor to enforce their verdicts, and that the war an anchor ends inside a hierarchy it merely relocates to the hierarchy's edge.

It also vindicates the older paper's real thesis while re-describing it. That paper held that all three documents served one unchanging elite interest — the extraction of colonial wealth — and that is true and this study does not dispute it. What the extraction reading could not explain is *why the masks got flimsier*, and the anchor mechanics supply the answer the older frame lacked: not because the interest changed, but because the source of authority the interest could draw on was decaying, from an external author to a self-author to a self-author under challenge. The interest was constant; the anchor available to legitimate it was not.

Where it strains. Four things, stated as findings rather than hedges.

First, and most seriously, this study risks the exact error the series was built to correct. The between-hierarchy lens is so well-suited to the European side — the powers,

their rivalries, their documents — that it can reproduce the sin of the original eight-part framework: analysing the coordinators in fascinating detail and leaving the coordinated-against as a mute object, present only as "the excluded" and "the floor." The corrective is the diagnostic that names the two outsides, and the insistence, in the section above, that the colonised were an anchor-bearing *player* whose entry broke the field. But a reader should hold the strain in view: a framework about how armed elites settle among themselves will always be better at the elites than at the people under them, and this case is where that bias is most dangerous, because the people under them were whole continents.

Second, the "decay sequence" is cleaner than the history. The three documents were separated by centuries and addressed different regions under different conditions; treating them as three points on one curve is an analytical imposition, not a fact the sources hand over. The papal bull governed Iberian claims to the Americas; Berlin governed a fourteen-power scramble for Africa; the Mandate governed the wreckage of two specific empires after a world war. They share a structural function, and the weakening across them is real, but the reader should not mistake a structural family resemblance for a single continuous institution declining in a straight line. Much else changed across four centuries besides the strength of the anchor.

Third, the framework flattens the rivalry between the powers. Presenting the European states as a "field of hierarchies" facing an "anarchic void" is the realist picture, and it is useful here, but it understates the real institutions, alliances, dynastic ties, and shared law that genuinely bound the powers to one another in ways the pure-anarchy model misses. Hedley Bull's "international society" is invoked precisely to register this, but the study leans on the harder Waltzian picture because it fits the colonial partition well — and it should be said plainly that a fuller account of European international order would be less stark than the field-of-warlords image this study finds convenient.

Fourth, calling the principle of self-determination "the anchor of the colonised" is a framework claim, not a historian's, and it compresses an enormous and various history. Anticolonial movements were not one thing, did not share one doctrine, and did not all ground their claims in the Wilsonian principle — many long predated it and drew on entirely different sources. To gather them under a single "rival anchor" is the framework doing what frameworks do: seeing structure at the cost of particularity. The structure is, I think, really there. But the particularity it costs is the actual

texture of how dozens of different peoples fought their way out from under this apparatus, and that texture is not this study's to flatten.

THE DECAYING ANCHOR
SECTION NINE

The disciplines: what this analysis must not flatten

Four cautions.

The documents are being used structurally, and their content is being read against their pretext. Article 22 of the League Covenant speaks of a "sacred trust of civilisation" and the "well-being and development" of dependent peoples, and there were individuals within the mandate system who took that language seriously and tried to hold mandatory powers to it. To read the trust language purely as disguise is the framework's move, and it is a defensible one given how the mandates functioned in practice, but it should not erase that the words meant something to some of the people who wrote and administered them. The framework analyses function; it does not have privileged access to every administrator's sincerity.

"Effective occupation" and "sacred trust" and "sovereign donation" were legal fictions with real and lethal consequences. The abstraction of this analysis — anchors, properties, fields — must not sand the edges off what these documents licensed. The Berlin Act's tidy articles presided over the Congo Free State, held as the personal property of a Belgian king, where forced-labour rubber extraction killed on a scale that is still argued over but was catastrophic by any count. German South-West Africa, a "C" mandate after the war, was the site of the genocide of the Herero and Nama peoples. The line drawn in 1493 opened the era of the transatlantic slave trade and the demographic collapse of the Americas' indigenous populations. To make the legitimating machinery legible is not to soften by a single death what the machinery legitimated.

The sources on the European side are abundant and self-serving; the sources on the other side are thinner in the same archives. The documents, the

conference minutes, the diplomatic correspondence all record how the powers understood and justified themselves, and a study built on them will see the partition substantially as the partitioners saw it. Recovering how the divided understood the division requires different sources and different expertise, and where this study has not drawn on them it has necessarily reproduced the archive's built-in perspective. The reader should discount accordingly.

And the framework's elegance is a temptation to be resisted here above all. A decay sequence with three clean points and a structural explanation for each is intellectually satisfying, and intellectual satisfaction is exactly what should make one suspicious when the subject is the conquest of most of the world. The neatness is the analyst's, imposed for legibility. The thing itself was not neat, was not a sequence, and was not, to the people inside it, a study in the properties of anchors. It was four centuries of their world being taken and divided by people who wrote documents to keep from fighting each other over it, and the documents are legible precisely because they were written by the winners for the winners. That legibility is a fact about the archive, not a fact about justice.

Conclusion: the paper the guns did not need

Returning to the puzzle.

The puzzle was why the most heavily armed states on earth, able to crush any colonial resistance, nonetheless went to real trouble to obtain a piece of paper before and after taking what they took — and why the papers got flimsier each time.

The answer to the first half is that the paper was never for the conquered. It was for the other conquerors. Each document was an anchor among rivals — a shared source of title by which the European powers, facing one another across a field with no authority above them, converted possessions any of them might have grabbed from the others into ownership they would collectively recognise and defend. The guns did not need the paper to take the land from the people on it. The paper existed so the powers would not have to turn the guns on each other over the spoils, and the effort they spent on it is the measure of how badly they wanted to avoid that — which is the framework's oldest rule, that force never pays for what it does not need.

The answer to the second half is the decay sequence, and it is the study's real finding. The papers got flimsier because the author behind them got weaker. In 1493 the author was outside the competition — a Pope two Catholic powers could not command — and the anchor was strong, and failed only when the Reformation split the group that recognised him. In 1885 there was no author but the powers themselves, in a room, and a rule the strongest could simply reinterpret is barely a rule at all. By 1919 the powers not only authored their own title but had to do it in front of a rival principle they could not silence, so they disguised conquest as trusteeship and promised the arrangement's own eventual end. And then there was no fourth document, because the outside the anchor had always constituted finally

became a player — the colonised acquired an anchor of their own and, at last, a floor beneath it, and took the field the documents had governed.

That is the lesson the case adds to the series, and it is the companion study's thesis seen from inside the machine. An anchor ends the war within a settlement by drawing a line around an inside — and across that line the war does not end but waits. For four centuries the line ran between Europe and the world it divided, and the apparatus that kept the European powers from fighting each other was the same apparatus that authored the taking of everyone else's land. When the people on the far side of that line at last became authors of their own title rather than the objects of everyone else's, the apparatus did not reform. It collapsed, because an anchor that constitutes an outside cannot survive the outside becoming an inside of its own. The papers the guns did not need were, in the end, the record of a settlement among warlords — and like every such settlement, it lasted exactly as long as the men it excluded had no coalition of their own.

THE DECAYING ANCHOR
SOURCES

A note on sources and scholarship

What this rests on, what is verified, and what is contested.

The framework. The theory applied here — possession against ownership, the bystanders' coordination problem, the anchor and its four properties, the field of hierarchies, and the between-hierarchy proto-anchor — is developed in the companion papers of this series (*The Settlement Protocol*, and the companion *The Field of Anchors*) and is applied here rather than argued from scratch. Its borrowed components: Jeremy Bentham on property as a secured expectation rather than a natural fact; Morris Cohen on ownership as delegated coercive power; Max Weber on the state as the monopoly of legitimate force; Barry Weingast (1997) on rights-policing as a coordination problem among those who must share a signal for when to resist; Michael Chwe (*Rational Ritual*, 2001) on public ceremony as a machine for manufacturing common knowledge; Thomas Schelling on the credibility of threats; Kenneth Waltz (*Theory of International Politics*, 1979) on anarchy as the ordering principle of the between-states field; and Hedley Bull (*The Anarchical Society*, 1977) on the thin "international society" of common institutions, among whose goals he lists the stabilisation of possession.

The primary documents, verified against their texts. *Inter Caetera* (Alexander VI, 4 May 1493): the pole-to-pole line one hundred leagues west and south of the Azores and Cape Verde, the grant of lands west of it to the Spanish crowns, the exception for lands held by another Christian prince before Christmas 1492, and the sanction of automatic excommunication for unauthorised entry — all confirmed against the standard translations (Davenport; the Gilder Lehrman and Yale Avalon texts). The bull's ineffectiveness toward non-parties (*res inter alios acta*) and Spain's failure to win wider recognition are noted in the standard scholarship. The 1494 Treaty of Tordesillas moved the line west to 370 leagues, giving Portugal its claim to Brazil. The General Act of the Berlin Conference (26 February 1885): Article 34

(notification of coastal possessions and protectorates to the signatories) and Article 35 (the obligation to establish authority sufficient to protect existing rights and freedom of trade) confirmed against the treaty text; the doctrine of effective occupation, and its extension via the hinterland and sphere-of-influence doctrines beyond the coastal terms actually written, follow the standard historical treatments. Article 22 of the Covenant of the League of Nations (1919): the "peoples not yet able to stand by themselves," the "sacred trust of civilisation," the "tutelage" of "advanced nations" acting as Mandatories "on behalf of the League," and the A/B/C grading confirmed against the Covenant text; the toothlessness of the Permanent Mandates Commission (reporting and recommendation, no compulsion or sanction) follows the standard scholarship. Wilson's Fourteen Points (8 January 1918): Point Five confirmed against the text — an impartial adjustment of colonial claims in which the interests of the populations concerned must have equal weight with the claims of the government whose title is to be determined. **A correction the sources forced: the phrase "self-determination" does not appear in Point Five, and the study says so; Wilson used the broader principle chiefly for the peoples of the defeated European empires, not for the Allied colonies.**

Contested and interpretive. Whether the 1493 bull was intended as a full "donation" of sovereignty or a narrower grant is debated among historians and does not affect the structural argument. The scale of mortality in the Congo Free State is argued over, though catastrophic on any estimate; the Herero and Nama genocide in German South-West Africa is now widely recognised as such. The characterisation of the three documents as a single "decay sequence," of Wilsonian principle as "the anchor of the colonised," and of the European powers as a "field of hierarchies" facing an anarchic void are this framework's analytical claims, not settled historical consensus, and the section on where the case strains flags each. The date bracket 1493–1948 is a convenience: the lower bound is the bull, the upper the early wave of post-war decolonisation (Indian and Pakistani independence in 1947, and the general visible collapse of the mandate and colonial systems around then), and neither bound is sharp.

On what is not attempted. This study makes no claim to original historical research. It is an analytical synthesis applying a structural framework to an established record, and its contribution, if any, is in the questions put to the material rather than the material itself. It is also the first study in the series to take a *field* of

hierarchies rather than a single hierarchy as its unit, and should be read as a test of whether the framework can do that at all — a test the section on where it strains treats as not entirely passed.